

On getting out of your own way

Musician Gelli Haha discusses not taking things too seriously, going in unprepared, and committing to your vision.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2518 words.

The Gelli Haha project has been an intentional transformation from your previous music and identity. What doubts or challenges did you face along the way?

A lot of them. I would say my biggest—I think everyone’s biggest enemy, especially creatively, is usually themselves. Obviously, there’s resource accessibility things as well, but for the most part, what gets people down the hardest is their mental space.

I’ve always had the determination to create things. That was never my fear. ... I was kind of a perfectionist, or there was something I was trying to control, or it was hard to go outside the box.

I grew up playing violin, and I was in choir, so more traditional musical structures—I was raised that way musically, where it was just, you learn the music, and you do it well. But I found my ways to be creative through that.

I also was taking it too seriously. I wanted people to take me seriously so badly, but then, this whole *Switcheroo* thing for me was like, “I don’t take anything seriously anymore,” and that actually has freed up my process exponentially.

Can you talk more about how you overcame these challenges and doubts?

It was a process. I definitely shed some tears in some studio sessions in the beginning because I was nervous to just let loose. I would come into the studio, and I would have two versions of the song, a whole version of a song in my head, and be like, “This is it. Let’s record this.” There’s no room for error in a process like that, when I feel like I have to control every bit of it. I think why this music comes across the way it does is because we were so honest with ourselves throughout the whole process.

The more we recorded [*Switcheroo*], the less I came into the studio with anything prepared, which sounds kind of funny. I would prepare things if they were coming to me intuitively, but I wouldn’t force anything. I did allow our time in the studio to be exploratory and off-the-cuff, whatever was coming to mind.

I recorded [*Switcheroo*] with Sean Guerin [of [De Lux](#)]. It was good to bounce ideas. I don’t have to know all the answers. I can throw things at the wall, and Sean is more of the producer. [He] can guide me, support something, or be like, “Let’s move on.”

How did you get connected with Sean? How did you find this crucial collaborator?

In a very funny way, I suppose. De Lux played a festival [that’s] a part of Treefort Music Fest. It’s called

Snowfort. I used to work for Treefort back in Boise. I grew up in Idaho. [Sean] played Snowfort, which was supposed to be right before Treefort 2020, but then, the festival was at the end of February 2020. It was one of the last real things that happened that year. And then, Treefort got canceled.

We met right then, right before the world ended. But he lived in LA, and I lived in Boise, and so we didn't talk for a couple years and then I moved to LA. A few months into living here, he was like, "Oh, you live here. What's up?"

We didn't start collaborating much right away. It was maybe here and there. I would record vocals for his cousin or something, or we would do little things. I was very involved in my previous project [releasing music under my given name, Angel Abaya]. I hadn't even released it when we reconnected in LA. I was very much in that, and he was very much in De Lux. I think their fourth record came out around the time that we reconnected. We were on our own pathways.

But then, a few weeks after, The Bubble came out, which was dead on arrival for me. I wrote that record two years previously in Boise when I still lived there. I'd been living in LA for a year and a half at that point. I was already like, "This is not for me anymore." I didn't really know what was for me, but then [Sean] was like, "We should work on something." And then, we started writing "Funny Music," which was the first song we wrote, and it took us a few months because we were kind of not in a routine, and we were still doing our own things.

That was the process when I talk about crying. I would get—it was a fear response or something, where I'd be so nervous to not know the answer to something or be perfect right away. But Sean and I are very close, and I was able to open up quicker. It might not even have been possible if it was someone else, but that was the beginning. After that, it got more consistent. It took us a year and a half to finish the record, but the first three to six months, we were just slowly moving.

I'm curious how you arrived at the Gelli Haha visual aesthetic, the red of it all, the whimsy. I'd love to hear about that journey.

I've always loved storytelling in a variety of ways. I grew up watching musicals, and so I always was really drawn to not just music. Music was the core, but I did love a story around it, and dancing, and a visual component to things. Growing up in Boise, I didn't have a ton of experience or opportunities to do that, but once I was 18, a new dance company started, and they were looking for a keyboard and singer girl, and that was me.

Being a part of that was a big experience for me. I was with them for five years, and I was an assistant for them. I eventually became a program director and started managing productions, and not necessarily being creative, but being around a creative process with professional dancers and musicians and designers, and being in big theaters.

All of their work was original, and we were always in a theme. It's kind of funny, they did have a red theme for one of the productions, so maybe I copied. I'm just kidding. The way I use red is a bit different, and the whole story is completely different with Gelli.

Throughout all my projects, I've always wanted to be visually compelling but maybe didn't know how to do that. For some reason, I definitely thought I could do it this time. I had Pinterest boards even while we were writing the first song. I saw red pretty early on. It was an early color, and at first, it was more traditional.

I love the '20s. Something about just the Roaring Twenties, it was very fun and slapstick, kind of vaudeville. I cut my hair six months into writing the record. My hair used to be long. I saw [Gelli] as this silly, French flapper girl, but in a colorful world. In the beginning, it was red, but also red with black or white. The first photo shoot we did was very, very red, but then, if there were any other colors, it would be black and white. Which is funny, because there are no dark colors in [Gelli's] world anymore, and it ended up just being red and white.

By the time we released [*Switcheroo*], we were very much in this bright red primary color thing. At first I was very like, "Everything has to be red. I don't want any other color." It's been fun to introduce a little bit more blue and yellow, and they earn their keep, because it is really intentional if it's there. It's also intentional if it's red, but for me, red is really bold, passionate, playful, and in your face.

If you wear a lot of it, it's kind of silly. And people compliment me all the time now. I'm always wearing all red now, and I'm sure I do look cool, but I just think it's funny because people feel compelled to say something. I used to not get as many compliments, but it's almost every day, and it's just because I'm wearing a lot of red. I think it just stands out, and for obvious reasons, that's pretty important to the branding of it all. Not that that was the first thing in my head, but it is. I do think it's pretty important to what's happened.

From where I'm sitting, your music is perfectly suited to red and bright colors. Did the music inform the visual choices? Did the visuals inform the music choices?

I think it was a mix. My Pinterest board started when we were writing the first song. Sean was not skeptical per se, but...I think one of my gifts is, I have this bird's-eye view vision, and even if it's not there yet, I see it. Sean's more on-the-ground, "I have to make it to believe it's real." I think he thought I was crazy for a long time, because I was like, "I know what this looks like. I know how this is going to feel."

Even if we were still working on the first song or the second song, I was already talking to my best friend Selby, who is a dancer—she lives in Belgium, and I name-drop her twice on the record. We would talk every week and brainstorm this world and what it means, and we have this whole manifesto, and it got kind of deep, and I wanted it to go deep. I didn't want to tell people what it was. I wanted to just show them, and I wanted it to be so deeply ingrained in everything we do that we didn't have to explain it at all. I'm coming from an artistic place when I say all these things, but obviously, all of these are important for branding and marketing as well.

I was talking with Selby as I was talking with Sean and making the music with Sean. It was all spiraling into one another a bit. We only had six songs when we did our first show. We did our first show a year ago or so. I don't necessarily think it informed the rest of the record as we were finishing it, but I was thinking about the show. For me, the show is everything because the show is—as I said, I was obsessed with musicals growing up. It's the whole package for me, the song and dance and the theatrics of it. It's the full artistic experience.

There's this one quote you gave in another interview that's along the lines of, anybody can be a Gelli. When you say that, are you talking about just the friends you're collaborating with, or are you talking about literally anybody?

It was more of a general statement. We call [the band] Gelli Kompany, and I do see it as, yeah, it's Gelli Haha, I am Gelli Haha, and this is the Gelliverse, but the Kompany—this world would not be the same without Sean. Selby is a secret collaborator in a sense because she's not physically with us. She's in Belgium, but she's been such a big part of the philosophical foundations of the project. And then, we have Sienna [a.k.a.] Sisi Haha. She is one of the dancers and the main choreographer. I've worked really closely with her. And then there's Davi Haha, [real name] David Gutel, who directed all the music videos. He came in after we'd created the initial show.

We based all the music videos off the show. [David] has his own expertise in ways that we can present that. For the "Bounce House" music video, we did what we do in the show, but we did it in 360°. It was a bit more elaborate, and we were able to have seven trampolines instead of three. It was an expanded version, but everything came from the live show.

Anyone can be a Gelli. There is a philosophy to the project, and not taking things seriously is a big thing. I think there's a hope Gelli has, maybe it's a little innocent, maybe it's naive, but there's also this knowing, especially on songs like "Pluto is not a planet it's a restaurant." Gelli is overcoming all these hardships around her and she still moves forward, and she can still do it, even though she's saying, "I'm afraid." She can still continue. I think anyone could be a Gelli and should be.

It's interesting to hear you talk about Gelli in the third person right now, whereas it's easy to present

yourself as Gelli. I'd love to hear where the line is between Gelli and the name I see on screen here.

Oh, yes, Angel [Abaya]. I talk a lot about Gelli in third-person because I created her. I feel like Angel is the puppet master and Gelli is the puppet. I created it, and it is a part of me. It's probably similar with so many other artists who have some sort of persona to them. Right now, you're talking to Angel in a way, because I'm the one who built everything with everyone. I'm the one who talks to everyone and leads things. Gelli just gets to go on stage and throw confetti and scream at people and have fun. I guess Angel is a bit more like the mastermind person.

That makes me wonder what you've learned about yourself through bringing Gelli to life.

Nothing that I didn't necessarily know before, but I do think one thing that's really come to mind for me is, I'm such a Libra, which is a cardinal sign. It's very leadership and very connecting aesthetics and collaborators, and it's all about relationships. Everything about Gelli is everything I've worked really hard to be my whole life. What's cool about it is...also, I am Gelli.

It might look like I created Gelli, in the sense that she wasn't real before. But maybe scratch that. I think, more, I unearthed her. I think of Gelli as kind of my inner child. She's a part of me that I was separated from for a long time. *Switcheroo* is an interrogation of self and allowing myself to be that playful person.

Honestly, this is kind of crazy—I'm looking at the record right now on the floor, and there's two [of me on the album artwork]. One of them is Gelli, and one of them is Angel. There's this joining of selves that happens on the record and in the performance.

Gelli Haha recommends:

Not taking life too seriously - have fun! play! surrender!

NYC 1980's underground art & music scene a la Pyramid Club

Anything Björk does

Marina Abramovic - Rhythm 0 (1974)

A personal trampoline for bouncing on the go

Name

Gelli Haha

Vocation

musician

□

Sophie Prettyman Beauchamp